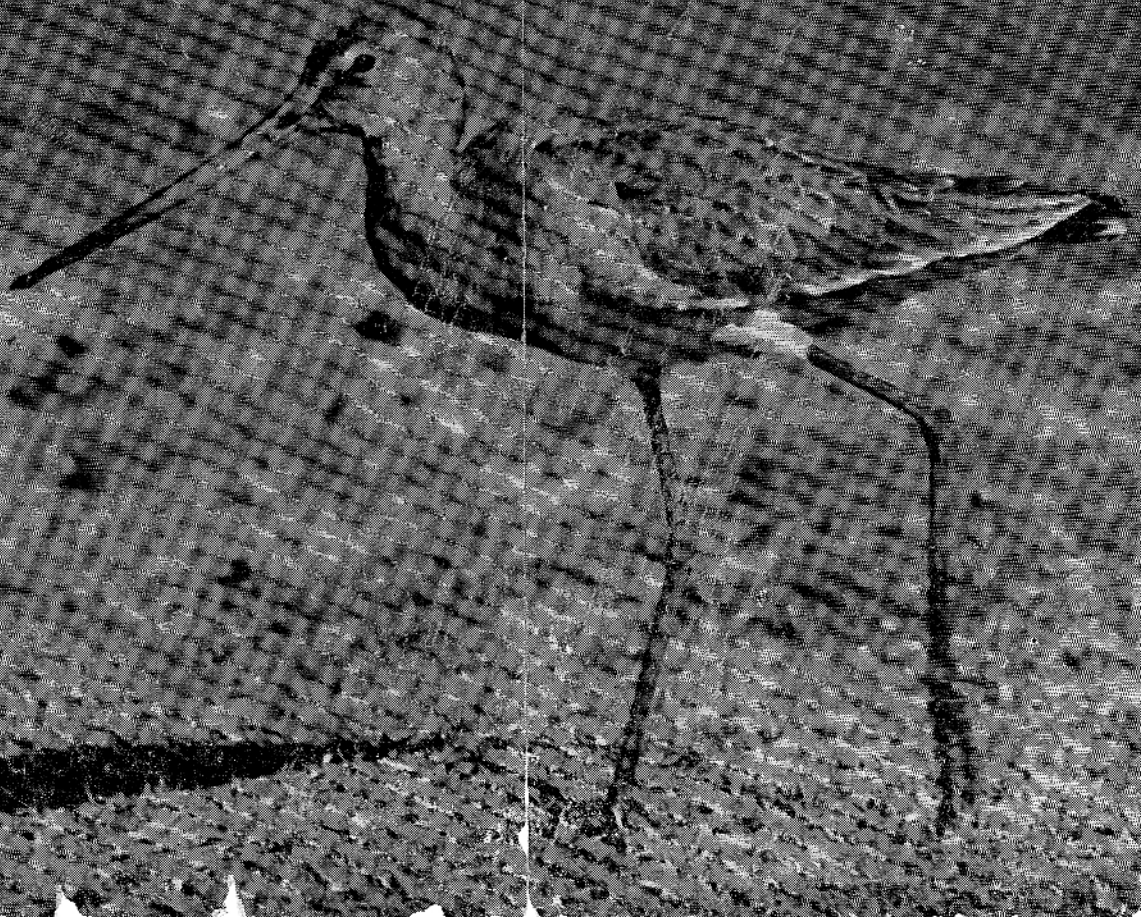


# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL. XXI NO. 1 JANUARY 1981





# NEWSLETTER

## FOR BIRDWATCHERS

Vol. XXI No.1

January 1981

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## Editorial

Jaipur Birds: Dr. Ashok Kumar Sharma has sent a note about birds found in various habitats in Jaipur. The habitat has been classified into thickly populated area, thinly populated area, gardens, agricultural fields, waste land, wetlands, and hilly areas. Altogether a 117 species have been recorded. The winter migrants include the Redshank, Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, River Terns, Rosy Pastor, Starling, Orphean Warbler, Indian Great Reed Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Bluethroat, Black Redstart, Yellow Wagtail, Grey Wagtail, White Wagtail. The only instance of a migrant coming in summer, and apparently not present in winter, is the Bluetailed Bee-eater.

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Singing Competition: Arun Bhatia writes to say

"1. An American visitor told me of a 3 month long exhibition at Hong Kong Museum of History May-July, 1980 when seven volumes of John Gould's "Birds of Asia" first published in 1850 were on display. Different illustrations, hand-painted by the Author were shown each day. This American visitor was not a birdwatcher and could not tell me more. Perhaps some of your readers can.

2. I understand that in Kelantan in Malaysia, they have every June, a Bird singing competition. Early in the morning over a hundred birds compete in three one-hour rounds from cages hung on tall poles. Moving from pole to pole, judges listen to the songs of each bird which is required to emit three kinds of sound; Shrill and Piercing, Slightly Guttural, Deep and Resonant. Residents of, or visitors to Kelantan, can perhaps describe this competition."

\*\*\*\*\*

Which Species?: Jasper Newsome who is now stationed at Almora writes to say "The most memorable bird for me here is a Babbler (Sp?), smaller, neater and less gregarious than common and jungle Babblers, but active, noisy and what I can only call slyly bold. It is a sort of olivaceous grey brown over most of its plumage, but has streaks of lighter, shiny grey on breast and head. The only real features are distinctly rusty ear coverts and rusty wings, particularly the primaries and coverts. It seems to be resident, territorial, and is quite garrulous with a variety of whistles, chirrups and chatters - one vigorous, descending chirruping call being part of its territorial display, accompanied by much putting up breast and drooping of wings. This bird is not included in Salim's common bird book, nor Flemings' Nepali book (Nor Salim's North Eastern Himalayan Book). Strange that my favourite bird here (it enters my huts even!) is an unknown. That is symptomatic of the state of my ornithology, and I still cannot send you a decent article on the birds here. One day!"

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New Societies: It is encouraging to see the large number of birdwatching societies which are coming up in our country. The latest to come to my notice is Evergreen (An Organisation of Wildlife Enthusiasts). They have written to say they saw a Hill Myna within the grounds of the Theosophical Society Gardens at Adyar. Obviously it must have escaped from a cage.

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Multiple Baya Nests: Newsletter No.4 of the Drongo Nature Club reports the siting of several Multiple Baya Nests. On enquiring from Salim Ali about this phenomenon, they received the following reply:

"I was glad to get your note on a recent birdwatching trip to Somnath. In almost every large colony of Baya nests there are one or two, or more, multiple nests-usually 2 or 3 storeyed, but sometimes upto 6 and rarely even upto 7. They apparently belong to different birds who have taken possession by ousting rivals. But only one nest is in use at one time, and the entrance of the previous is sealed by the newcomer before he commences to add his own nest to the complex. Of the two 'entrances' you mention, one is that originally provided by the owner himself while the hole on the side is usually bored by a predator (perhaps a crow) trying to reach the contents of the nest. It is sometimes made by a munia trying to utilise a disused Baya nest for laying its own eggs in."

\*\*\*\*\*

Kingfishers take on home helps: AC Soundararaj has sent an interesting clipping from the New Scientist of 17th July 1980 which is reproduced here.

"Many birds employ helpers at the nest site. These helpers may feed the young and help to drive off predators. In recent years researchers have asked themselves what makes a pair take on helpers; and do helpers get anything out of it? Dr. Heinz-Ulrich Ruyer of Seewiesen, West Germany, has come up with some interesting answers (Behavioural Ecology and Sociobiology, vol 6, p 219).

Ruyer studied two colonies of the Kenyan pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis rudis*), one at Lake Naivasha, the other at Lake Victoria. Like the British kingfisher, pied kingfishers feed almost exclusively on fish. To catch their prey they fly over the water, searching, sometimes hovering, and plunge when they see a fish. At Lake Victoria pied kingfishers feed mainly on fish of low energetic value. At Lake Naivasha energy-rich fish are more plentiful, and the kingfishers fare better. Similarly, the average amount of time taken to catch a fish is only 5.9 minutes at Lake Naivasha compared with 13 minutes at Lake Victoria. The picklings are not so good at Lake Victoria!

This difference leads to very different helper structures at the two colonies. Helpers may be of two sorts. Primary helpers are the yearling sons of at least one of the breeding pair being assisted. Secondary helpers are surplus males whose own attempts to pair that year have failed. They are unrelated to the pair being assisted.



At Lake Naivasha where food is plentiful only primary helpers are accepted. "Candidate" secondary helpers are driven off. At Lake Victoria both primary and secondary helpers are accepted. It looks as though secondary helpers are taken on only when the breeding pairs are desperate - when they need as many beaks as they can muster. If so, we'd expect the survival of young reared by parents alone to be greater at Lake Naivasha than at Lake Victoria. This is exactly what happens. More than twice as many survive at Lake Naivasha.

We might also expect that at Lake Victoria the more secondary helpers the greater the chances of survival of the young. In fact, with one helper the survival of chicks is 78 per cent. With two it is 100 per cent. Clearly, when food is scarce secondary helpers are useful to have around!

What do helpers get out of it then? By aiding his mother or father in raising his half brothers or sisters a primary helper increases his inclusive fitness. And the secondary helpers? By helping a female one year, a secondary helper may be allowed to pair with her in the following season. Thus by serving a female the secondary helper is really looking to the future.

Clearly to the male of the pair secondary helpers are potential competitors, so it is no surprise that the male frequently attacks candidate secondary helpers. The male's decision to take on a secondary helper must balance the risk of losing his mate next year against that of losing his young this year. At Lake Victoria the secondary helper's application is often reluctantly accepted!"

#### Birdwatching at Somnath (Prabhas-Patan) by Udayan Mehta

During the Diwali Vacation we visited Somnath, near Veraval on the Saurashtra coast. The six day trip starting on 6th November 80 was delightful. I had luck in the morning as my neighbour called me to show a beautiful bird sitting on a pillar. It happened to be the Brownheaded Storkbilled Kingfisher (*Pelargopsis capensis*). A large multi coloured bird with a brown head greenish blue upper parts, underparts chocolate coloured, with a large heavy red bill. Travelling by the Somnath Mail we looked out of the window and saw large groups of Black Ibis between Jetalsar and Junagadh.

We reached Somnath on 7th November and our room overlooked the sea to the right of our room so the sacred temple of Lord Shiva which as is well known has a long history of destruction and renovation. A few illuminated ships could be seen against the background of the setting sun.

Next morning we walked on the beach and saw a number of Gullbilled Terns (*Gelochelidon nilotica*). We noticed that they did not dive inside the water like River Terns. They always picked up the prey from the surface of the sea. Some birds appeared to be Brownheaded Gulls.



In the evening again on the beach we saw quite a few Brownheaded Gulls (*Larus brunnicephalus*) where the river Hiran meets the sea. They were being harassed by Jungle Crows and as they flapped their wings to escape from the crows we could clearly observe their black primaries with the two mirrors near the tip of the wings.

With these gulls there were two Gullbilled Terns sitting some distance away and there was also a solitary reef heron completely slaty with a white patch on its throat, a long straight pointed yellow beak and yellow toes and webs.

After sunset there was a group of 8 to 10 birds which we identified as Spotted Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*). It was interesting to watch them eating small crabs. On the morning of 9th November we walked inside a small jungle country mostly of Babul trees (*Prosopis juliflora*) between the temple and the Triveni Sangam. We saw Black Drongos, Magpie Robins, a Whitebreasted Kingfisher. On the morning of the 10th we saw a few Grey Wagtails and White Wagtails. The White Wagtails was the race *Dukhunensis* with white ear coverts. At Triveni Sangam we saw 20 Grey Herons and also an Openbilled Stork. Later we also saw a Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*). We were surprised not to have seen any Blackheaded Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*). I remember having seen them in January 1979 in hundreds. On enquiry with the local fishermen we were told that these Gulls arrive in late December.

Birds - off Sukhna Lake by AK Chakravarthy PS Sandhu, & PK Ananda Rao

On 2nd February 1980 there was a cold wave and a slight drizzle and we had little hope of seeing many birds in such inclement weather. All that we saw on Sukhna Lake were a flock of Coots and Sandpipers.

We decided to look for birds in a small patch of Acacia forests and we came across a hoopoe a lesser grey shrike (*Lanius minor*) a party of Scarlet Minivets, a Black Drongo, a Goldenbacked Woodpecker and a Chestnutheaded Nuthatch. It was interesting to see the Woodpecker searching for insects in the comparatively larger trees while the Nuthatch worked its way up and down the trunks of much smaller trees. On the dung-pads we saw Grey Wagtails looking for insects. A party of Grey Tits were feeding in typical fashion hanging upside down below the tender twigs of trees. We saw a male Bluethroat (*Erithacus svecicus*) come out of a lantana bush to pick up an insect.

As was to be expected we found that there were different species of birds in the four different environments we had observed. One was the forest floor the other the bare ends of Acacia trees, third the Acacia tree trunks and four the foliage of the acacia tree.

While returning home we found the two graceful Blackbellied Terns (*Sterna acuticauda*) on Sukhna Lake.



## Correspondence

### Blackwinged Kite in Bandipur by Saumitra Banerjee

On 5th November 1980 we went to Bandipur and apart from coming across much enthralling fauna, we were fortunate to see a Blackwinged Kite (*Elanus caeruleus*) parachute down in its customary style on a marshy bit of land. Later it flew towards our vehicle and for a moment I thought there was going to be a collision. I was surprised to see that in the list of birds at the reception counter in Bandipur Sanctuary the name of the Blackwinged Kite has been omitted.

### Mini Keoladev Ghana near Ahmedabad by UM Rawal

Members of the Drongo Nature Club visited this Sanctuary on the 22nd of November. Because of the poor rainfall this year the reservoir was utilised for irrigation and the level of the water was very low. Nevertheless we were able to see 21 species of birds including Spoonbills, Flamingoes, Rosy Pelican, Grey Pelican, Whitenecked Stork, as well as White Storks.

### Nests of Lapwings by Aasheesh Pittie

This is with reference to the article by Shri. Prakash Gole and Shri. Taej Mundkur, on the 15th page of the No.6/7 issue of the Newsletter. I too have seen a nest of the lapwing (whether red or yellow-wattled was not confirmed) with Shri B.C. Choudhury - a keen birder - which was like the one they saw. This nest was on the ground in the Lion Safari Park of the Nehru Zoological Park of Hyderabad. It was round with a diameter of approx. 8 inches. The eggs were laid on a platform was extremely neat and flat and almost geometrically round. The four dirty brown eggs with haphazard black blotches all over were arranged in such a way that the tapering end lay in the center (as also observed by Shri. V. Santharam in the same Newsletter).

This nest had most probably been abandoned because there were no birds around. This nest also was built near a water source - the Miralam tank - very close to the nest.

### Birds Near Narora by Asad Rafi Rahmani

I read with interest your editorial in the latest issue of the Newsletter. Regarding 'Checklists for tourists' (p.3), I have following to say:

"There is a huge reservoir in the Ganga river near Narora in Bulandshahr district of U.P. (India's fourth atomic power plant is being built nearby). During winter, hundreds of migratory birds visit this reservoir and stay uptill April or May. I have seen almost all the riverine ducks and waders of North India.



A big colony for engineers and workers of the power plant is being built nearby, so there is every likelihood of the destruction of the natural habitat in future. I have taken up the matter with the UP Tourism Department and the Forest Department and both agree that the Narora reservoir is a good place for a bird sanctuary or a refuge.

Chestnutheaded Bee-eaters and others in Madras by V Santharam

Regarding Chestnutheaded Bee-eaters, I am sorry that at present I am not in a position to provide you with any information as we have not come across any in Madras. Madras has only two species of bee-eaters - the small green bee-eater (resident) and the blue-tailed bee-eater which is seen in Madras during winter. Incidentally the chestnutheaded bee-eater recorded in 'Madras' was actually collected in Shevaroy's and this specimen is being exhibited in the Madras museum.

As regards the Grey Plover sighted in Dodda Gubbi on 1st September by yourself and Mr. P.T. Thomas, I referred to Vol. 2, Handbook of Indian Birds, and according to the distribution it is said that the bird is "less common in inland waters - erratically or as a straggler - mostly on migration passage in autumn and spring. Recorded thus in Kashmir, UP, Bihar, Nepal, Assam, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Deccan. Doubtless also occurs inland elsewhere". Perhaps the bird you encountered was one such straggler.

While on the subject of migration may I be permitted to say some few words about bird migration in Adyar Estuary? As usual the common sandpiper was the first to arrive on 18th July and by the end of the month they were quite common here. On the same date a greenshank was seen in flight. Blackwinged stilts (over 100 birds) were seen on the 10th and on the same date a large sand plover, 1 whimbrel (in flight) and a redshank were seen. Swallows were seen occasionally from the 1st week of August, though they appeared to be common only by the last week of the same month. There were a pair of curlew sandpipers, one of them in breeding (reddish) plumage on 16th August along with 4-5 lesser sand plover and a littleringed plover.

On 1st September I was able to spot a Grey Plover (what a coincidence!) some little stints, over 25 bartailed godwits and 3-4 turnstones. On 4th, I spotted a few golden plovers in worn-out breeding plumage. On 6th I was able to observe 2-3 Terek or Avocet Sandpipers landing on an islet. On 13th September I was in for a surprise. Apart from a newly arrived Blacktailed Godwit which I saw side-by-side with the bartailed (the latter being seen for the first time in Adyar, this year) I was pleasantly shocked to find nearly 16-17 teals. On a later visit on 15th, (when I saw over 50 numbers) I confirmed them to be Garganey Teals. As the mouth of the river was closed by the sand bar, the water level was very high, submerging most of the islets and to the birds it might have looked like a lake and hence their presence there! Of course last year I used to see teals in flight here but never in the water. I am sure this is an unusual record.



### Baya Nests in October by D. Sidhartha

According to the Hand Book the breeding season of Baya Weaver Birds is from May - September. But in the month of October (1980) I had seen at least three colonies of Baya Weaver Birds. The male birds were constructing their nests. I had also seen a few female birds. Because the male birds were in their breeding plumage. These three colonies were seen in a field, where grass was being grown to be used as fodder.

Then in the month of November (1980) I was surprised to notice that all the nests had been abandoned by the Baya birds. Most of the nests were partially built, till the chamber. At the same time the grass in most areas of the field had been harvested. Does the breeding season correspond with the commencement of S.W. monsoon or in the presence of nesting material? What if both the factors are absent?

### Trapping of Partridges by D Sidhartha

I had gone out to watch birds at nearby fields on 3-11-80. By chance I met a bird catcher. This person had two wire cages with him. Each of the cages contained a male painted partridge. According to him, the birds were male ones. In fact this bird catcher had trained these birds to make sounds, on whistling. He also had a trap with him. A large rectangular box divided into a number of compartments. These compartments were lined with nylon wires, in order to trap a bird. The males on making sounds, lure the females which get entangled in the trap.

### Need for a List of Tree Species by BA Palkhiwalla

In the Newsletter for Birdwatchers (September 80), on page 3 under "Bird check lists for tourists", there is a suggestion for lists of resident and migrant birds in some of our cities. This is a welcome suggestion and Bombay Natural History Society is the right authority.

I would add my own suggestions that there should be also a list of local trees with their locations, like the one brought out by the tourist department many years ago, of which I have an old copy. Of course, that list is out-dated as many more new areas have come up in Bombay with beautiful flowering trees like Pangara, Peltophorum, Cassias and others. Yesterday, during my leisurely walk in the Churchgate Reclamation area I counted about 400 trees including a good number of the above and also Bhandi, Casuarina, Coconut, Scarlet Cordia, Bottle Brush, Pipal, Banyan, Gulmohur, Asupala and Rain trees.

I am sure a lot of our common resident birds like Bulbuls, Coppersmith, Tailor Bird, Sunbirds, Mynas, Parakeets, Sparrows, and Crows must be roosting and enjoying the fruits of some of these trees. You will, therefore, agree that birds and trees go together and if a list of birds of the cities is brought out, there should also be one for the trees.



### Mistaken Identity by RP Haran

We read with interest P.T. Thomas's letter in the Newsletter in Vol. XX No.12, concerning the presence of Chestnutheaded Bee-eaters in the CMC Campus, Vellore. We have been observing birds in this Campus for the past 3 years and have not yet made a positive identification of this particular bird, including Jan-March, 1980.

In that part of the Campus which Mr. Thomas describes, the Bluetailed Bee-eaters are found in larger numbers than the Small Green Bee-eaters, roughly in the ratio 3:1. The presence of the Central elongated tail feathers into blunt pins has always been to us, a reliable guide to the identity of the Small Green Bee-eater, in contrast to the Chestnutheaded Bee-eater whose central pin feathers project only slightly beyond the tail, as described in the book of Indian Birds by Salim Ali, 11th Edition.

All the bee-eaters seen here unfailingly correspond to the above mentioned feature in addition to size and the black necklace. With due respect to Mr. Thomas, we think that this is a case of mistaken identity.

### Birds Flying in Darkness by Margaret P Walkey

On receiving the December Newsletter, I was very interested to read Mr. V. Santharam's article quoting extracts from Clive Catchpole's book concerning certain birds flying in darkness and also having the ability to locate their individual nests. I was disappointed when no one else followed on, to shed light on these two areas of bird life, and am all the more grateful to Mr. Santharam for having done so now, two full years later! I found what he wrote most interesting.

### Studies of the Common Cuckoo (Cuculus canorus)

AP Gupte writes "The Common Cuckoo breeds in the Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh. It parasitizes the nests of Rufousbacked Shrikes. I have observed this in the eastern and central parts of the district. I have had no opportunity to observe it in the western part.

Two notes on the breeding of the Common Cuckoo in Hoshangabad district have appeared in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers of December, 1978 and September, 1980. In the latter, Mr. Zafar Futehally has quoted a passage from the Handbook, Vol.3, page 206, which contains the following sentence: "The whole subject calls for a more methodical de novo re-investigation."

I am willing to take up an investigation in the Hoshangabad area, but I feel that a thorough investigation can only be carried out by a team of persons equipped suitably.

(The Editor would appreciate if people willing to co-operate on this project correspond with Mr. AP Gupte, Friends Rural Centre, Rasulia, Hoshangabad, Madhya Pradesh 461001.

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## Review

Collins Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-Continent by Martin Woodcock, 1980. Collins, London. 176 pages, illustrated (mostly in colour). Price (UK):£4.95.

Of the several one-volume works which have been published on the birds of India two have remained firm favourites among bird-watchers for a long time: Hugh Whistler's Popular Handbook of Indian Birds and Salim Ali's The Book of Indian Birds. Of these, only Salim Ali's book has always been readily available, as new editions have been issued from time to time since the book's first appearance in 1941. Due to this and Dr. Ali's excellent text 'The Book' has become the most widely used bird guide in India.

Martin Woodcock's new book is a most welcome addition to this category of bird book. The area considered is the same as that covered in Ali & Ripley's Handbook: that is, the whole of the sub-continent from the Himalayas south to Sri Lanka and including Pakistan and Bangladesh. The book deals with a total of 544 species of Indian birds, of which 267 are illustrated in colour in the main text. Short notes on habitat, distribution and habits are given for these species. The common crows and drongos, illustrated in black & white, are dealt with similarly in this section. This is followed by a 'synopsis of families', systematically arranged, with additional very brief descriptions of a further 272 species, of which 72 are illustrated in black & white. The introduction explains the natural division of the Indian sub-region and deals with some selected general aspects of bird-life in India. As is usual in this type of book there is a section explaining the terms used in describing the external features of a typical bird and many other terms which may be unfamiliar to the reader are clearly defined in the glossary. A very useful feature of the book is the carefully selected and annotated list of books which not only gives almost all the important works on Indian birds but also lists many other books, not necessarily dealing with birds, which would be of interest to the reader. The book ends with an index to the English and scientific names of the birds dealt with.

The most attractive and useful feature of this book is the coloured illustrations. These portray not only the birds but also their typical habitat and there are pictures of both sexes in the case of sexually dimorphic species. These illustrations, which are the work of the author, are, on the whole, very good, though a few have come out rather darker or brighter than in the flesh. Despite the number of species dealt with the book is quite compact, the hard-back edition measuring 19.8 cm x 11.9 cm and is 1.7 cm thick when closed. These features make this book an excellent introduction to Indian birds and an attractive alternative to The Book of Indian Birds. The nomenclature is, on the whole, the same as in Ali & Ripley's Handbook, except for a few changes at the genus level, e.g. Ficedula for the Redbreasted Flycatcher and Cyornis for Tickell's Flycatcher (and congeners). Two mistakes have been copied from Ali & Ripley: Anhinga rufa applies to the African Darter and even if the African and Asian species are united A. melanogaster should be used as it is the oldest name. Similarly, the correct name for the



Slaty-headed Scimitar-Babbler should be Pomatorhinus horsfieldi, not P. schisticeps. These, however, are minor points and should not detract from the value of the book. At £4.95 it is not exactly a bargain but a less expensive soft-back version is available.

D.P. Wijesinghe

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### Unidentified Subscribers

Subscriptions have started to come in for which the Editor is grateful but so far only a 100 have been received. Will the others kindly oblige soon.

Incidentally three money orders were received during December without the name or address mentioned on the tear slip. In consequence we are unable to determine from whom the money was received. Will those subscribers whose payments have not been acknowledged in this issue kindly inform the editor about their remittances? We would also request that the name and address is always mentioned on the tear-off slips of the Money Order Forms.

EDITOR



Subscription for the year 1981 have been received from:

Maharashtra :

Smt. Sushila Mehta, 11, Firadosh Manzil, Band Stand, Bandra, Bombay 50, Rs.20/-; Smt. Kamala Venkataramani, 13-A, Everest, Anushaktinagar, Bombay 94, Rs.15/-; Mr. Sanjay D Moghe, 1709, Sadashiv Peth, Poona 4110030, Rs.15/-; Mr. Prakash Garde, 'Poorva', 229, Rani Laxminagar, Nagpur 440 022, Rs.15/-; Mr. Anil S. Mahabal, 1935, Sadhashiv Peth, Pune 30, Rs.15/-; Mr. Thomas Gay, Dev Kunj, Prabhat Road, Poona 411004, Rs.20/-; Mr. JP Irani, No.9-8, Rustom Baug, Victoria Rla Road, Bombay 400 027, Rs.25/-; Mrs. R.W. Ghatge, Shivangaon, Nagpur 440 005, Rs.20/-; Mr. Kiran K Kelkar, 94/6, Erandavana, Poona 411004.

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Bihar: Mr. Sureshwar Gupta, c/o. Mr. B. Gupta, 153, ED, Sir Syed Street (N), P.O. Khagaul, Patna 801105, Rs.15/-; Mrs. Jamal Ara, M/7 (Single), Harmu Housing Colony, Ranchi 834012, Rs.20/-;

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Errata: The note on Rosy Pastors by Indra Kumar Sharma in the October issue of the Newsletter referred to Jodhpur. Unfortunately Jodhpur was misprinted as Jaipur and the error is regretted.

EDITOR